



Class Notes

By [Suzanne Scafuri](#) October 14, 2010

SCHOOLS

Class Size Matters

Class sizes have continued to grow over the past ten years. What has this trend done to the quality of education and what can you, as a parent, do about it?

When I was a little girl, I wanted to be locked in the [Smithsonian Museum](http://www.si.edu/visit/) (<http://www.si.edu/visit/>).

I lived in Washington, DC at the time, and I didn't like going to museums when they were full of people, full of echoing children and heavy shoes. I could never get close enough to see the exhibits, and, because I was shy, I wasn't the type to shove my way to the front.

So, when being pulled by a classmate's hand through exhibit after exhibit, I fantasized about getting lost, finding a quiet space, and then exploring later alone. I would roam the halls, getting closer than was allowed to Abraham Lincoln's bed, crawl inside the animal exhibits, and fall asleep in the minerals room.

I felt more comfortable in quiet spaces. I learned the best that way: I was able to experience my environment at my own pace, reading at warp-speed. Numbers that I never thought would ever multiply would magically solve themselves, and my hardest subject, Science, became manageable with drawings, real-life examples, and help from my engineer grandfather.

Now that I'm an English teacher, I often reflect on who I am as a learner. And, with all of the press of government budget cuts, [No Child Left Behind](#) (<http://www2.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml>), public vs. private education, censorships, and test scores and the opportunity to be an educational columnist, I am looking harder at who kids are as learners. What do they need? What is the best educational option to promote learning: public or private? Why should we expect that all students will perform the same in the same size classroom?

I have done what I consider to be three types of teaching: public school teaching in a classroom with 35 kids, 105 per day kids total, private school teaching in a classroom with 8-17 students per class, 30-72 kids per day total, and tutoring one student at a time.

Public school teaching is the most difficult for a variety of reasons. The limitations of curriculum, budget cuts, and huge class sizes made teaching at the public school like a hurdle race. With a class of 35 students and a 50-minute class time, a teacher can hope for about 15 full minutes of teaching. The rest of the time is answering questions, resolving discipline issues, and passing out papers. Not a lot of people believe this is true, but, trust me, it is.

35 students means that each student gets about 1.5 minutes of my time in class directly. What if we are working on practice sentences and a student has a question? By the time I get to Student A, Students B through F have questions, too. Some questions don't get answered. That's the hardest part of all.

Homework is another issue altogether. In giving homework, it is the teacher's responsibility to make it valid by looking it over and making corrections. Because most of the homework I assigned was essays, grading each exercise would take a minimum of 4 minutes each. That equals 420 minutes, or 7 hours of grading; that is if there is only one assignment.

Did all my students always get the most thoughtful, most detailed, and informative comment from me on every single paper? Most of the time, yes. But it took years of teaching experience behind me and some multi-tasking magic to make it happen.

I know that some Pacifica teachers feel the same way about their overcrowded classes. One high-school teacher said, "It is not humanly possible to do this job effectively when the student to teacher ratio is large. If I had 90 total students instead of 140, this would be more manageable. Calling the parents is time consuming, but also necessary, and it is easier to do when there are less students."

Due to expanding class sizes, in 1996, California mandated a decrease in class size by close to [1/3 in grades K-3](#). This plan was thought to cost the state over \$1 billion per year (<http://www.publicschoolreview.com/articles/19>). The Public Policy Institute of California (<http://www.ppic.org/main/home.asp>) compiled data from [1997-2000](http://www.ppic.org/main/publication.asp?i=155) (<http://www.ppic.org/main/publication.asp?i=155>) that showed that the decrease in class size caused some interesting and unexpected side-effects.

Because of the reduction, more schools and classrooms were needed to accommodate the overflow of students. A significant increase of inexperienced and new teachers caused a gap between the students who had an experienced teacher in English A while the other half were in English B with the inexperienced teacher. This gap widened by the year 2000 to an [average 20% of students](#) (<http://www.ppic.org/main/publication.asp?i=155>) (students of color had a higher gap percentage, while white students had a lower gap).

Student achievement did not increase either. In fact, it decreased. Because of the percentage of inexperienced teachers, student achievement decreased in standardized tests, [especially for students of color](#) (<http://www.ppic.org/main/publication.asp?i=155>).

The results may have been different if the state would have given the entire \$1 billion per year to the project. But, as funding became tighter, schools reverted back to larger class sizes, [some even larger than before](#) (<http://www.ppic.org/main/publication.asp?i=155>).

There is no solid research that proves that smaller class sizes make a difference in a student's education, but I've worked in private schools where class sizes have ranged from 8-17 students per class. In working with 8 students for 50 minutes, I would have about 40 minutes of full teaching time. With 17 students, I had about 35 minutes of teaching time. I could check on their work with better comments and one-on-one help and I could thoroughly answer questions. I had enough time

for grading homework, communicating with parents, and planning lessons.

Were these students more successful with smaller class sizes? Probably, yes, and many people would like to have their children in private schools, but the tuition can be crippling.

In California, the average private school tuition is [\\$17,000](http://www.greatschools.org/find-a-school/defining-your-ideal/private-vs-public-schools.gs?content=59) (<http://www.greatschools.org/find-a-school/defining-your-ideal/private-vs-public-schools.gs?content=59>) a year, a large amount for families struggling in the current economy.

Though many private schools offer a sliding scale tuition and scholarships, sometimes the costs can put too much stress on a household budget, even if the child would learn best within a smaller class.

Very effective teaching, in my opinion, is with one student. It makes sense: when tutoring, a student has my full attention, and questions from students and parents produce conversation and thorough explanations.

I'm currently tutoring one student named Logan. Because his experience in private school was not as positive as he and his parents had hoped, Logan's parents decided that they would take charge of Logan's education themselves, hiring tutors and finding a new way to educate their son.

Logan is a somewhat solitary student who is very interested in birds. Most of his friends are adults who also love birding, and Logan has traveled the world with his parents, living in communes, working with scientists, and learning about the world in a different way than a student would at a desk with a book.

When I told Logan I was writing this article, he was very animated about his views on class size. He told me that in a class of 17, he felt like he wasn't heard as much by his teachers, that there was pressure from other boys to not ask questions or act silly and he wasn't able to refocus his attention sometimes so he would think about birds, lost to the lesson at hand.

He likes his schedule now much more. I meet with him for 8 hours a week, covering English and History. He works with a Mandarin teacher 3 times a week, and for math, he studies Euclid with his father. For Science, he works at the [California Academy of Science](http://www.calacademy.org/) (<http://www.calacademy.org/>), assisting researchers with categorization and cataloguing. He walks to our lessons, birding along the way.

He likes being able to have real working relationships with his teachers, where he can ask any question and get a detailed answer. His parents like it that they can email me and get an almost immediate response, with lots of details and thorough comments about even the smallest of assignments.

Though there are costs involved when choosing tutoring, it is likely to be less costly than most private school tuition.

Though this type of education works for Logan, it probably wouldn't work with everyone. He does not socialize much with kids his own age, and he doesn't have the opportunity to do group work—losing important team-building skills.

But, which education would you rather have for your children? One where there just isn't enough time to be completely heard, one where the class sizes are smaller but costs can be very high, or the tutoring option? Everyone learns best differently, and there is no perfect answer.

It's finding the right option for your children, the right size for the best learning, that matters most.

Interested in a follow-up to this article?

About this column: Columnist Suzanne Scafuri is an educator with 15 years experience in public and private middle and high schools. She is an author, an educational activist, and she helps parent a pre-teen who attends school in the Bay Area.

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